

Learning from redrawing the ancient city of Naples: the *weaving*, the *thickness* and the *tonalities* of non-monumental historical *Palazzo*

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Reading and Drawing

A drawing (a plan, a section, an elevations, an axonometric projection or a perspective) can express or show the peculiar physical, spatial, technical, anthropic, historic condition of a place. From this statement, we developed the idea of drawing as a research investigating the different qualities of a place, aiming to discover and understand the several hidden stratified layers. Just like overlapping paper, if seen in the correct juxtaposition, they are capable to give new meaning to a project. Drawing and redrawing is a process through which the specific conditions of a place could be synthesized and therefore communicated.

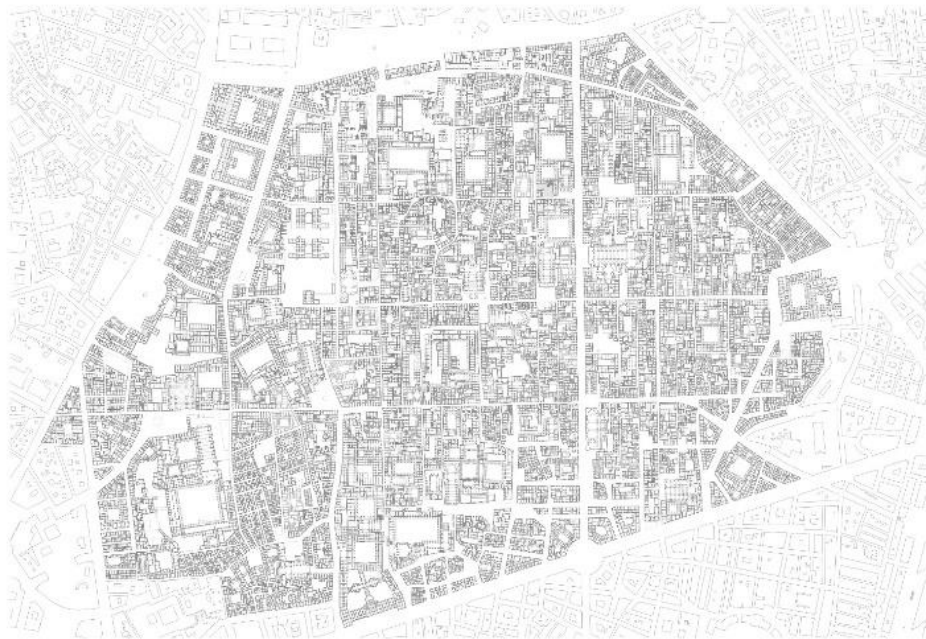
Drawing is a tool of knowledge: it allowed us to transpose the visually crowded *Palazzo* and its sensorially rich physical substance to a two-dimensional support. Some information clearly gets lost through this process, but much more is gained, since the action of drawing is mediated by perception and its influence on thought. A drawing is, in fact, always something more than a simple imitation of an object, including our own interpretation of the built environment translated in lines on paper. Drawing is something similar to reading and remembering, rather than something connected to creative intuition. As an act of memory, drawing implies subtly one's own culture, ideas, attitude, that mixes together with the perception of the physical space that is intended to be represented. All these features come together in what could seem like a trembling line, but containing in itself one's own

way of seeing the world, becoming a working tool. In fact, the tool of an architect is to be able to see.

From this statement, we defined three different characters juxtaposing in the Neapolitan historic city: the *weaving*, the *thickness* and the *tonalities*.

The *weaving* is mostly a characteristic of the hard urban tissue: blocks, streets, *insulae*, it shows the grain and therefore the recurring dimensions of a place, allowing us to understand how the different pieces are kept together, where the volumes and the space between them derived from. Observing this quality is really helpful to directly confront with the urban matter in order to understand how could contemporary projects still continue the centuries-old structure of the city. Getting into it, looking at *thickness* means to grasp how things are actually made. The way that walls, thresholds, doors, windows, balconies deploy to create different relationships between the public and the private realm are often different and worth investigating. Therefore trying to understand the ratio between the physical built mass opposing a certain amount of empty space is a symbol of more or less openness of a building to the city. Looking at the *thickness* of the *Palazzo*, we could also try to map the tectonic vocation of a context and therefore of the construction techniques that allowed the realization of such incredible urban conditions. The different *tonalities* that the Neapolitan *Palazzo* presents have to do with the different nuances that could be find strolling around the city and looking at the different visual layers that overlap on the façades of buildings. This density of information is an important lesson for our commitment as architects. It is something that we seek and replicate into projects starting from the experience of the place, trying to communicate its atmospheres through photographs, sketches and drawings. Studying these complex existing houses is an exercise that could be seen in opposition to the two main contemporary design attitudes for the historic city: temporariness and homogenization. The first attitude tends to let architecture vanish, proposing lightness and transparency as banal values or ephemeral constructions not strong enough to create new urban conditions and therefore not achieving any benefits for the city, if not illusory. The latter tries to answer the complexity of contemporary conditions translating it into unique objects, a formalist approach, which is the favourite globalized market scenario. As a result, cities are slowly getting similar one to another, presenting no perceivable quality. Our proposal starts from those issues,

offering a proposal based on the observation of what is already there, the historic city, as an answer to the questions posed by contemporary life.



Plan of the ancient city of Naples

From the Domus to the Stratified Palazzo

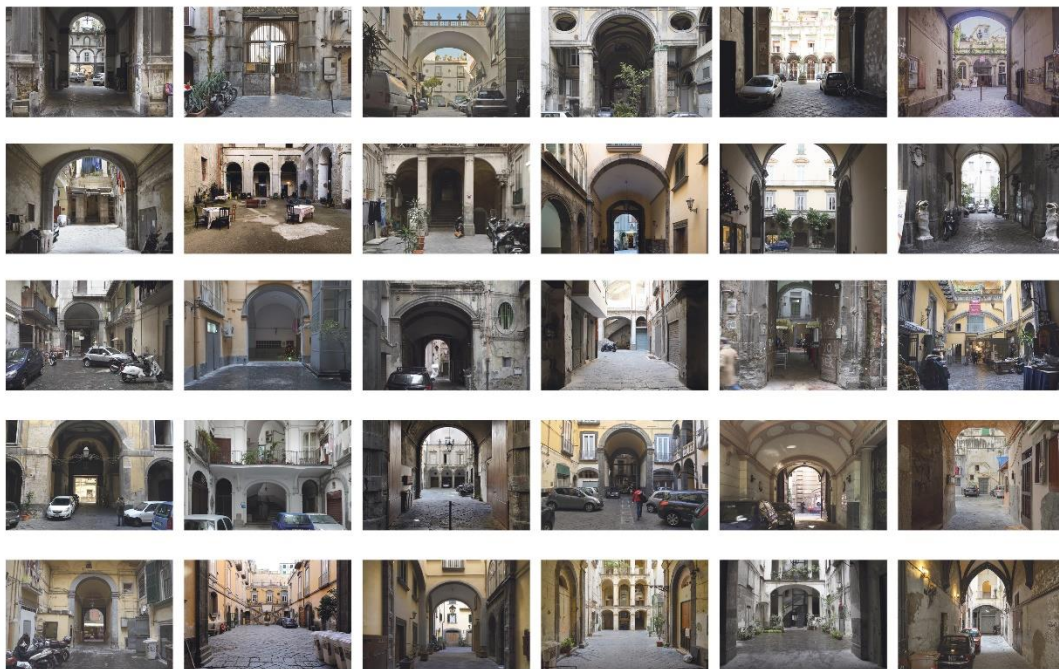
The ancient city of Naples represents a privileged place to understand how historical architecture still has a deep influence on contemporary urban conditions. Its deeply stratified tissue, structured on the ancient Greco-Roman grid, keeps being a witness of the ever-changing uses, habits and behaviour of its citizens. The Neapolitan *Palazzo* mostly characterized as a compact building with a central courtyard grafting itself in the urban blocks, presenting different spatial qualities emblematic of our contemporary urban debate, such as resilience and self-organization; clear examples of still keep being appropriate for human life. The *Palazzo* represents the basic unit with which the city was built within the Greco-Roman grid system. Founded in the sixth century BC, the foundation core is structured on three major axes, the *decumani*, directed in the east-west direction, respectively via dell'Anticaglia, via dei Tribunali and via San Biagio dei Librai, intersected by a series of *cardi* in the north – south direction. The space resulting from this strict organization defines an *insula*, an urban block of fixed dimensions; the long side (north-south) is in fact about five times the shorter (east-west), directly deriving from

the Roman measures of the actus (37 x 185 m). Since its foundation, the ancient city has remained almost unchanged in its original urban imprint.

During the centuries, the historic centre has been stratifying through successive processes of contamination, overlap, juxtaposition or concretion in the rhythm of different historical times and cultures. This gradual process, not homogeneous or uniform at all, has led to the transformation of the isolated, compact, continuous block of the Renaissance city then evolved in the eighteenth century where 'the fabric of the domus widens, opens and thickens, to contain the new architecture of the Neapolitan *Palazzo*' (Savarese, 2002).

In the eighteenth century the ancient urban body, once compact, begins an unstoppable process of reduction and those buildings becoming increasingly porous, giving the illusion of being visually crossed. With these transformations the original *insula* grows longitudinally without interruptions, as happens crossing the threshold of *Palazzo Spinelli* where it is possible to look at the succession of the courtyards or in the other *Palazzi* on via Nilo where staircases tie around narrow courtyards from shady basements up to sunny terraces. The irregular profiles of the ancient and increasingly stratified city were slowly defined. The actual urban blocks grew on the original footprint, freeing courtyards, patios, wells of light, turning hallways, incorporating huge or very small monumental staircases and opening internal galleries facing the empty space of the courtyards; those buildings could only grow in height, never crossing the perimeter of the pre-existing *insulae* that were included between the edges of the city walls. The result of these transformations is a certain degree of porosity that, generates an unsuspected concatenation of voids: this permeability happens to be not only at the courtyard level, but moves to all the floors of the *Palazzo*, becoming see-through and looking almost as they've not been fully finished. It is like a continuous and homogeneous landscape traced from the underground of the city, where the tuff – 'volcanic, coming from the deep sea, capable of solidifying itself in contact with the water' (Trione, 2014) - was extracted to build the parts of the submerged city. Unlike the nineteenth century block, this one clearly defines itself in the expansion areas near the walls, is organized around a few simple rules that are specified case by case respecting the external conditioning - the pattern of the streets, the presence of a pre-existing monastery, etc. These conditions imply that only a few specific parts could be decorated and made monumental, such

as gates, staircases, loggias, since they are part of the spatial sequence that from the street brings into the house. Gate, entrance hall, courtyard, open staircase, are the invariants: double courtyards, loggias on the upper floors, hanging gardens, are some of the possible variations. In the articulation of these sequences it is possible to observe some changes in proportions – that could be very often surprising – but also in the amount of light or the resonance of building materials. This specific condition defines the pauses or accelerations in the experience of the *Palazzo* where the concordance of punctual elements of these complex articulations catches the eyes of the passers-by.



The thresholds of the *Palazzi*

An Operative Proposal

“Designing from the place requires cool observation and a careful reading of the place. Initially we try to make a small number of what one could call portrait photos of a place that capture its nature and character on different scales. It is essential to visit the site as often as one can. After reflecting on the observations one has gathered, return visits are necessary to verify, clarify and possibly review one’s initial

observations, again with the help of photographs and sketching.” (Beigel, Christou, 2013)

This research tries to define a phenomenological path that aims to read and understand the particular spatial devices and material conditions of the specific reality of the *Palazzo*, underlying the importance of learning to see and to understand the already existing historic city, against the fascination of contemporary abstract operations detached from a natural evolution of the built environment. The experience of a place like the ancient city of Naples, too dense and complex to be explicated only through images or typological analysis, is composed of not one but many smaller sensuous experiential situations; each of them worth analyzing. The various *insulae*, tirelessly stratified in the millennia, combined themselves together to form a continuous urban body that makes the ancient city so significant to study. From the particular to the general, then, trying to understand how before reflecting on why, distilling a series of properties that should be taken into account for the transformation of the city. Reading through different layers allows us to grasp what are the fundamental lessons that the built environment carries over time and bring into the contemporary project. Through frequent and in-depth surveys, we could experience a place and its peculiar spatial and haptic qualities. Strolling, stopping to observe something that catches the eye, touching, taking photographs, sketching all actions that allow different images to stratify slowly in the eyes and hands of the observer, training the senses to a better understanding of the built environment. From a sample of about seventy *Palazzi*, the three specific non-monumental cases that have been studied present substantial morphological variations that make their conceptual schematization too simplistic. The specific urban condition they are a result of made them evolve according to their peculiar and different characteristics. Therefore, they should not be referred to some abstract crystalized geometries traced on the ground or in a hypothetical historic shape, since only life and the passage of time bring life to that set of ever-changing phenomena that it is worth deepening and investigating trying to understand their meanings and reasons.

Our working proposal consists of three different actions. An action is something that involves a certain physical engagement for the user; a movement, a dynamics. To act in order to know, to push oneself experiencing space and its connotations. The photographic reconstruction, the architectural redraw and the critical schematization

through physical models. The first step was to use photography to try describing a place. Photographing a space is the first step for gathering information about the building and to train the eye to observe dimensions and proportions. Recomposing the pictures taken during several surveys and walks through the different urban situations of the ancient centre helps our perception to focus on some elements often unseen during the surveys that lead to other detailed researches. By choosing a series of photographic sequences adaptable to the particular characteristics of the singular building, the various degrees of intimacy crossing the building have been described: from the street to the court, to the staircase and finally to the house, through different thresholds, rooms and spatial modifications. These sequences were shoot taking into account some common rules that are essential for the comparison and the success of the exercise. The second step was of redrawing the three *exempla* in their entirety through the typical architectonic representation: plan, section and façade. During the various surveys in the ancient city, we' have been sketching, measuring, taking notes therefore analyzing the physical consistency of the buildings, their solid masses and the space-in-between them. The characterizing elements of those architectures join as a whole and become responsible for the precise atmosphere of a place, allowing us to discover each time new information for the understanding of the how. The various pencil sketches have then been transformed into drawings in 1:20 scale. Drawing and redrawing is a slow path of evaluations, errors, repetitions and doubts, which adds a different depth of meaning to the contemporary inclination to stop at a retinal knowledge level. 'Drawing is a process of observation and expression, receiving and giving, at the same time' (Pallasmaa, 2009); in fact, sketches contain within them the mood and expectations of the person who draws, carrying with them always something more than what constitutes its actual material subject. Hand and eyes connects together filtered by imagination, memory and personal consciousness, building on paper reality made of ink. 'The hand-eye-mind connection in drawing is natural and fluent, as if the pencil were a bridge that mediates between two realities [...] the physical drawing and the non-existent object in the mental space that the drawing depicts' (Pallasmaa, 2009). The third step was structured around the realization of several physical models, in different scales and with different materials. Moving from a two-dimensional support, like a drawing, to a three-dimensional state, like a model allowed us to observe

certain aspects previously unnoticed. It implies a degree of abstraction to transpose reality and made with materials like stone, plaster and wood in a scale model the essential parts of a real building. Training the hands to manage shapes, proportions and dimensions to transmit clearly and instantaneously what the substance of that space is and how it materializes on our working table, since 'the simultaneity of understanding three-dimensional space and its relationship with man and light [...] when the model is placed under the real sun, is something ineffable and infallible' (Baeza, 2013). So, if drawings allow us to understand how a building is made, showing the single elements that contribute to a whole, physical models let us understand the space generated by those elements and make clear the ideas underlying them. Working with models of a built environment is a useful exercise to gain a greater awareness of a historic context, while improving natural manual skills. Through our hands, we appropriate of certain measures that are specific to a site, which are internalized and made our own, being then interiorly transformed into an augmented sensitivity in relation to the theme of the contemporary project for the historic city. The phase of realization of models was very significant as it highlighted the effective consistency of these spaces through their de-structuring in the basic minimum elements which have been consequently reassembled them into a single object.

Palazzo di Ludovico da Bux, Palazzo di Nerone, Palazzo Mosca

The case study we present are *Palazzo di Nerone*, *Palazzo Mosca* and *Palazzo di Ludovico da Bux*, strong examples of how architecture could keep very different conditions together. These buildings are capable to keep their clear and precise spatial structure together with their capability to adapt and modify themselves according to the needs and necessities of the people who inhabit them.

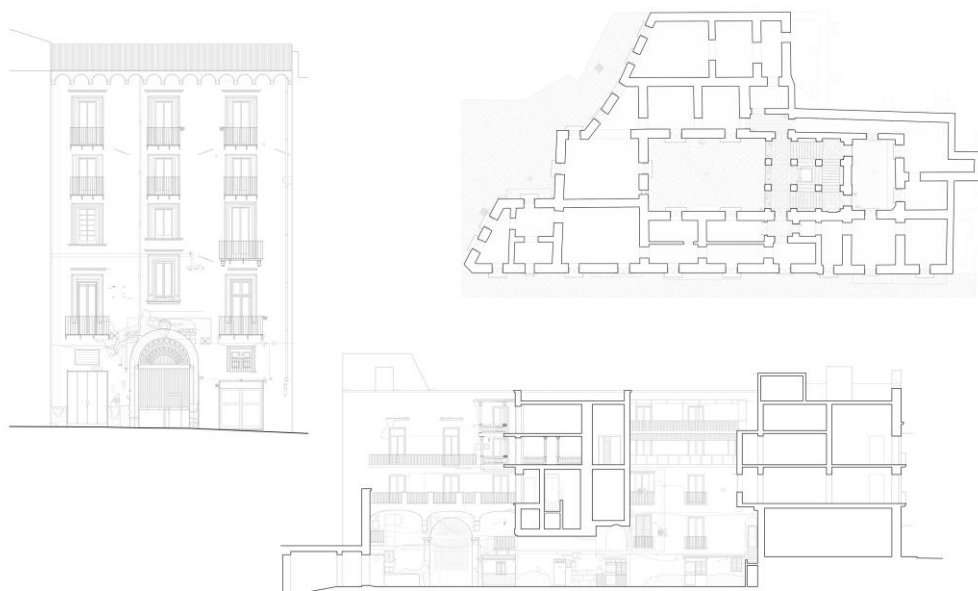
A compact and narrow building, still coherent with the urban dimension; from one *cardo* to another, the *Palazzo di Ludovico da Bux* fits the small dimension of one of the most famous *insulae* of the historic city, freeing in its middle a tiny courtyard not bigger than a living room. Its sequence of spaces twists and turns around this narrow empty space, that on one side is just large as the *androne* – the entrance hall – once a richly decorated gothic chapel, which was then eventually transformed into the new access from via Nilo. The *androne* is the first room to be experienced in the spatial sequence, actually showing the span between the main façade and the

courtyard façade, representing the *thickness* of it; each room facing the street has that fixed dimension, allowing both views on the street and on the courtyard. A small passage lead the visitor to the hidden first ramp that bring to the *piano nobile*, the main floor of the *Palazzo* where noble families had their home. At this level, the non-monumental staircase, steep and narrow, open up in a gallery giving access to different flats. Crossing those rooms, threshold after threshold, one reaches the upper floors through six ramps, parallel in space at different levels, built during different times to reach higher levels that slowly grew one on another. Light gently filter in through small cuts in the walls, light wells or just self-made openings, symbol of a slowly stratified construction that has always been appropriate for its inhabitants. The higher the density, the lower the privacy; nevertheless the architectural quality of these spaces could hardly be found in contemporary housing projects.

The second case study lies on the northern *decumano*, a jagged street bordering the remains of an area characterized by the presence of ancient theatres. *Palazzo di Nerone* is a microcosm contained in a building, shaping a very important corner where different conditions meet: On one side, two big brick arches built in AD 62 to support the neighbouring Roman *Odeon* not to collapse, on the other its imposing presence allows different floor heights to merge together in the urban grain. On this basic structure organized on two different courtyards kept together by an extraordinary octagonal staircase, many different flats grow one on another, each one with different dimensions and spatial qualities. From the *decumano*, the main façade is compressed between the two arches, therefore receding and creating the access to the first courtyard. Once inside, the staircase is not immediately visible, but it should be discovered: an experience that allows a sensuous experience of the space; the questions the building poses are to be solved only by getting into it. The spatial structure reveals the *thickness* of the built space, since the rooms are as large as the entrance hall, result of the structural span, achieving a great spatial effect with openings on both sides of it. The original octagonal staircase has great proportion, guiding the visitors until only the second floor, being the actual access of only a few flats: during the centuries, four more other staircase were built; some to reach just one flat, some to overcome a small height difference. Despite all these modifications,

everything looks naturally stratified, leaving its spatial strength and compositional coherence untouched that still achieve incredible atmospherical conditions.

Palazzo Mosca presents the typical features of a Neapolitan *Palazzo*. This architecture bends following the morphology of the urban block in which it develops, with a large rectangular courtyard in its centre and an imposing open staircase at the back, which becomes the true main elevation visible from the street. A building that owns all those recurring characters of the *Palazzo* type but indeed hiding, under its canonical structure, an accident, which makes it rich in interest. In fact, the overscaled spatial sequence not only guides from the entrance hall to the big courtyard and then up onto the huge winding staircase, but also beneath it. A small central passage on the ground floor of the staircase brings the visitor to a ramp that slowly descends to another courtyard of very different proportions and atmosphere. A small and high space, wide just enough to allow the staircase to have a second façade. This more domestic courtyard is capable of keeping all the different floor heights together in a single urban gesture. In opposition to its indented perimeter, following precisely the city grain, this *Palazzo* opposes a rigorous geometry that defines the interior spaces with clarity; a modern attitude towards the continuation of the city.



Plan, Section and Façade of the three different *Palazzi*

Conclusions

Investigating the ancient city of Naples involves a specific cultural message: making architecture in a built environment means to let listening prevail on invention. Trying to read the crowded dense tissue, picking up spatial conditions, elements, references is something necessary to the construction of a personal archive made out of different disconnected pieces; fragments of contradictory combinations found in the historic city. Starting from the feeling of a place and its related fragilities and inaccuracies, we are capable to understand the intensity with which its fundamental values unfolded during time. In this way, we can define a phenomenological path of research that looks at contemporary design practices as conveyors of a different education in looking, reading the material and physical conditions of specific realities, resisting the fascination of contemporary conceptual operations detached from the natural change of built contexts.

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